DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 268 092 SP 027 391

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TITLE Attitudes Toward Teaching of High Aptitude High School Seniors.
PUB DATE Mar 86
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (Chicago, IL, February 26-March 1, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academically Gifted; *Career Choice; *High School Seniors; Job Satisfaction; Secondary Education; *Student Attitudes; Teacher Salaries; *Teaching (Occupation); Teaching Conditions

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the attitudes toward teaching as a career of high school seniors who scored in the top 15 percent nationally on the American College Test (ACT) and Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) College Admissions Tests. Six hundred twenty-nine students returned usable questionnaires in which they rated the attractiveness of nine factors about teaching. The factor "contribution to society and humanity" was rated highest and "salary" the lowest. The only factor which was clearly rated as "attractive" was "contribution to society and humanity." Two other factors were in the middle range: "fringe benefits" and "job security." The remaining six factors were clearly in the "less attractive" range; these were: "job autonomy and independence," "working conditions," "availability of jobs," "social status of teaching," "opportunities for advancement," and the lowest, "salary." If more high aptitude students are to be attracted to teaching, the profession will have to improve salaries, opportunity for advancement, social status, availability of jobs, and working conditions, as these were the least attractive features about teaching reported in this study. (Author)

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ATTITUDES TOWARD TEACHING OF HIGH APTITUDE HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

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ATTITUDES TOWARD TEACHING OF HIGH APTITUDE HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS[1]

by

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Introduction

During the past three years there has been a spate of reports critical of American Education which have appeared at the national, regional, and state levels. One of the most consistent and severe criticisms is the quality of persons admitted to and graduated from teacher education programs. These criticisms are replete with recommendations for reform and the cry to raise the ability level and competency of teachers is always heard.

The academic qualifications of persons entering teacher education have long been debated. A concern is that the best qualified persons pass up the opportunity to teach which results in more opportunities in teaching for the less qualified. The most frequently cited index of quality is the college admissions scores of high school seniors who say they plan to become teachers; their scores in the past were lower and have recently declined farther than have the scores of their peers planning to pursue other fields of study. The National Commission for Excellence in Teacher Education (1985) reports that "high school seniors who said they planned to enter teaching scored in the bottom quartile of all those taking the American College Testing (ACT) program examination, and ranked fifteenth out of nineteen fields" (p. 5).

A recent study of Scholastic Aptitude Test scores revealed that the less qualified entered education. The mean SAT scores for education majors was 812 as compared to 987 for engineering and 893 for all high school seniors ("Why Teachers Fail," 1984). Crews (1985) studied Georgia high school seniors' scores and found

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[1]Presented at the 1986 American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education's Annual Meeting, Chicago, February 26-March 1.

that persons entering teacher preparation programs averaged 759 on the SAT which was 100 points lower than the State average. Astin (1985) reports that students who are attracted to education "tend to be among the least well-prepared (least 'brilliant')of all college students" (p. 131).

The goal of attracting highly qualified persons to enter teaching needs little or no documentation. The report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) recommended that "persons preparing to teach should be required to meet high educational standards . . ." as one step to reform education in America. However, the situation is very complex, and many factors contribute to the difficulty in attracting highly qualified persons to teaching at this time. For example, during the last two decades employment opportunities have increased for women and minorities in non-traditional professions which encourage women and minorities not to enter teaching. Further, while the birth-rate curve moves toward its apex in the 1990s, more young children will be entering schools; however fewer 18 year olds will be available to enter teaching because of the low birth rate of the 1960s. Thus, education, a profession which traditionally receives fewer persons from the pool of highly qualified high school graduates than it needs, finds itself, because of external demographic and social forces, in a position of competing for a larger number of graduates as the highly qualified pool decreases in size.

Attracting new teachers from the ranks of the most qualified will be a monumental task. In an address "Who's Going to Teach Our Children?" Alton Crews, superintendent of the Gwinnett County, Georgia, school district, reported that the "cream of the crop" of teachers is leaving for employment in the private sector. He indicated that two airlines, Eastern and Delta, employed more female school teachers than did all of the schools in Georgia in 1981, and those teachers who opted for the private sector had the best grade point averages of graduating elementary majors that year (Crews, 1985).

If the best qualified high school seniors, in fact, select non-teaching careers, what attitudes do these students have toward teaching and what factors/conditions would make teaching more attractive to them? The purpose of this study was to ascertain the attitudes toward teaching as a career of high school seniors who scored in the top 15% nationally on two college admission tests and who during 1984-85 submitted their test scores to the admissions office of a Southern land grant university. The two tests used were the ACT (American College Testing Program) and the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test); on the ACT the top 15% is defined as a composite score of 25 or higher and on the SAT, a total score of 1050 or higher is the top 15%.

A questionnaire was developed utilizing criticisms of teaching found in current literature as the substance of the questions. Page & Page's study (1982), in which they surveyed high school students' attitudes toward teaching, was particularly helpful. A field test of the questionnaire during the winter of 1985 resulted in modification of the instrument to accommodate the suggestions for improvement.

A list of the "high scoring" seniors, their mailing addresses, ACT and/or SAT scores, and high school grade point averages, was obtained from the University's admissions office. The list contained 4,868 names, which included 929 persons who had submitted both ACT and SAT scores. Elimination of the duplicates resulted in a population of 3,939. In May 1985 the questionnaire, a cover letter from the dean of the College of Education at the University, and a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope were mailed to the 3,939 high scoring high school seniors.

The students were asked to provide basic demographic data: state of residence, age in years, intended college major, and sex; and if members of their immediate family had been or were an elementary or high school teacher. A Likert-like scale was used to obtain the opinion of the students as to the attractiveness

of the following factors about elementary/secondary teaching: availability of jobs, contribution to society and humanity, fringe benefits (holidays, insurance, retirement), job autonomy and independence, job security, opportunity for advancement, salary, social status of teaching, and working conditions. In addition, they were asked if they would recommend teaching as a career to a brother, sister, or best friend; if they would consider becoming a teacher; and if they had talked with an adult about teaching as a career. Finally, they were asked to indicate, in response to open ended questions, what was and was not attractive about teaching, why they chose a non-education field of study (if they had), and how teaching would need to change to attract them.

The Respondents

Questionnaires were mailed to 3,939 students and 629 (16%) returned usable questionnaires. High school grade point averages of the respondents ranged from 2.50 to 4.00; 80% were 3.20 or higher and 34% had achieved a perfect 4.00. Composite ACT scores ranged from 25 to 33, with a mean of 27.0. Of the 400 who reported ACT scores, 80% were between 25 and 28. Of the 229 total SAT scores reported, the range was from 1050 to 1380 with a mean of 1151.8. Eighty percent of the scores were between 1050 and 1220.

The 629 respondents resided in 32 of the 50 states and the majority resided in the Southeastern states. Two hundred, sixty-four (42%) were from Alabama; 529 (84%) were from Alabama and its contiguous states, which are Florida (109, 17%), Georgia (90, 14%), Mississippi (9, 1.4%), and Tennessee (57, 9.1%). Ninety-nine percent of the respondents were 17 or 18 years old; one was 16, one was 19 and two did not report their age. The mean age was 17.6. Fifty-one percent were females; 49% were males; and three did not report their sex.

Of the population of 3,939 students, 44 (1.1%) were black; 3 of those 44 returned the questionnaire. In view of the small number of blacks in the

population who responded to the questionnaire, the data were not analyzed by race.

Nine college majors accounted for 90% of the respondents; they were: engineering (196, 31%); undecided/general studies (82, 13%); health professions (78, 12%); business and commerce (73, 12%); social sciences (36, 6%); communications (31, 5%); architecture (24, 3.8%); biological sciences (23, 3.7%); and education (21, 3.3%). (The remaining majors reported, in rank order, were: computer and information sciences; agriculture; mathematics, fine and applied arts; humanities; physical sciences; foreign languages; home economics; trade, industrial, and technical; and community service.)

Thirty-three percent of the respondents reported that members of their immediate family had been or were an elementary or secondary school teacher. Twenty-seven percent had a mother who taught, 9% a father, 3% a sister, and .3% a brother.

Attitudes Toward Teaching

Respondents were asked to rate nine factors about teaching as to their attractiveness. The factors were gleaned from criticisms about education appearing in current literature and are basically the same as those used by Page and Page in their study reported in 1982. A 7-point Likert-like scale was used with "1" being least attractive and "7", most attractive. The rank order of mean ratings was:

Factor	Mean	Attractiveness (Rated 5, 6, or 7) Percent
1. Contribution to society and humanity	5.76[a]	85.8
2. Fringe benefits (holidays, insurance retirement)	4.39[a]	50.6
3. Job security	4.25[b]	49.9
4. Job autonomy and independence	3.74[c]	36.3
5. Working conditions	3.61[c]	31.2
6. Availability of jobs	3.25[d]	28.0
7. Social status of teaching	3.05[e]	14.2
8. Opportunities for advancement	2.75[e]	12.5
9. Salary	1.93[f]	3.7

[a]Significant at .01 level by sex and major.
[b]Significant at .05 level by sex.
[c]Significant at .05 level by major.
[d]Significant at .01 level by residence.
[e]Significant at .05 level by major.
[f]Significant at .05 level by sex, major, and residence.

The factor, "contribution to society and humanity," was the most attractive of the 9 factors with a 5.76 mean rating; 85.8% rated it "attractive" (rating of 5, 6, or 7). Not surprisingly, the "salary" factor received the lowest rating (mean, 1.93 and only 3.7% rated it attractive).

An analysis of variance revealed statistically significant response differences on six of the factors: "fringe benefits," "job autonomy and independence," "working conditions," "social status of teaching," "opportunities for advancement," and "salary."

"Fringe benefits (holidays, insurance, retirement)" was rated differently by males and females and majors; females saw the factor more favorably. While those intending to major in foreign languages, humanities, and education viewed fringe benefits favorably, those in agriculture, physical sciences, and architecture viewed it least favorably.

There were significant differences by sex in responses to the factor, "job autonomy and independence": women rated the item higher than did men.

The factor, "working conditions," was rated differently by intended major. Highest ratings were given by education and humanities and lowest by computer

and information sciences, biological sciences, fine and applied arts, and physical sciences.

The "social status of teaching" was rated differently by place of residence: students from Alabama rated it higher than those from the other states; however, they rated this category just above the least attractive end of the scale (3.25).

The "opportunities for advancement" factor was viewed differently by intended major. The groups which rated it highest were fine and applied arts and education and those lowest, physical sciences, computer and information sciences, and mathematics.

Although "salary" received the lowest mean score (1.93) of the 9 factors, the ratings were significantly different by sex, intended major, and place of residence: women rated it higher than men; Alabama residents rated it higher than those from the other states; and it was rated highest by education majors and lowest by physical sciences, architecture, and humanities majors.

The students were asked if they would recommend others to enter teaching. While only 10.6% would recommend teaching to a brother, 20.8% would recommend it to a sister, and 26.7% to their best friend. An analysis of variance revealed that responses to recommending that best friends enter teaching were significantly different when analyzed by sex and by intended major: females were more inclined than males to recommend teaching to their best friends and those intending to major in education were more likely to do so than those in humanities, computer and information sciences, agriculture, and communications.

While 51.2% would not consider becoming a teacher, nearly one-fourth (24.3%) would consider becoming a teacher, and the remaining quarter (24.0%) were uncertain if they would. These figures are interesting since only 3.3% of the respondents reported education as their choice as a field of study. Responses were significantly different when analyzed by sex and intended major: females were more likely

to consider teaching and those intending to major in education, foreign languages, and home economics were more likely to consider it favorably than were the fine and applied arts, communications, and engineering majors.

Asked if they had ever talked with an adult (parent, counselor, etc.) about teaching as a career, 43.7% reported that they had. Significant differences in responses were again detected by sex and major. Females had more often than males talked with adults about teaching, and those intending to major in education, fine and applied arts, and humanities had talked with adults more than had architecture, health professions, and engineering majors.

Four opportunities were afforded the high aptitude students to express an opinion about teaching in their own words. Students were asked to write a brief response to each of the following questions:

1. In <u>your</u> opinion, what is attractive about teaching?
2. In <u>your</u> opinion, what is not attractive about teaching?
3. If you have decided on a field of study other than education, why did you select it?
4. If you have decided on a field of study other than education, how would teaching have to change to attract you?

Approximately one-third of the responses to these questions have been analyzed and the following, tentative generalizations seem to be developing:

<u>Question 1. What is attractive about teaching</u>?

As reported earlier, females are more inclined toward teaching than males. Females' responses to what is attractive about teaching revealed four major features: (1) altruism; they used words such as "caring," "giving back to society," "helping;" (2) personal, e.g. "satisfaction," "exciting and interaction," "pride," and "importance;" (3) having an impact on children, e.g. "shaping their future" and "expanding;" (4) extrinsic values, e.g. "vacation," "schedule fits children," "conditions and pace of work," and a few reported an attitude of duty, e.g. "good

teachers are scarce and somebody must teach" or "there are too many unqualified teachers."

Males used some of the same descriptors as females, but the ratio of favorable responses was approximately two from females to every one from males. Further, males ranked the categories of attractiveness with "impact on children" and "extrinsic values" first, with each receiving approximately the same number of remarks, while "personal preferences" and "altruism" followed. No male mentioned the proposition that some well-qualified persons should take the responsibility for teaching, and more males than females left this question unanswered.

Question 2. What is not attractive about teaching?

Males responded three to two over females to this question. The "not attractive" features of teaching reported by males were: "low salary," "lack of respect," "no room for advancement," and "working conditions," e.g. "teacher abuse by students and irate parents," "uncooperative students" and "large classes." Females agreed with the males about low salaries, but they ranked other features in descending order; these were "working conditions," "lack of respect," and "no room for advancement."

Question 3. Why did you select a field other than education?

Males and females responded in equal proportion and kind to this question. They reported that a specific field attracted them, e.g. medicine or engineering; that their intended field had "prestige," was "exciting," was "rewarding," and provided "opportunity." Some mentioned that the chosen field allowed them to better use their "talents and abilities" (mathematics was often mentioned here).

Question 4. How would teaching have to change for it to be attractive?

In response to this question male and female responses differed in one major way: twice as many males as females responded that salaries of teachers would have to improve. Other areas were similar. Many reported that no change was

necessary; for example one female wrote, "No change is necessary, teaching is already attractive, but I just want to enter . . . ." "Prestige" was the next area ranked in need of improvement with other areas listed in descending order: "benefits and working conditions," "increasing standards of teachers," "provision of better teaching materials," and several other miscellaneous areas.

Discussion & Implications

Most studies of attitudes toward teaching have involved pre-service teacher education majors, in-service teachers, or groups of high school and college students. The literature is nearly void of studies of attitudes toward teaching held by academically able high school or college students. The purpose of this study was to ascertain the attitudes toward teaching as a career of high school seniors who scored in the top 15% nationally on college admissions tests.

Of the nine factors about teaching, "contribution to society and humanity" was rated highest and "salary" the lowest. The only factor which was clearly rated as "attractive" was "contribution to society and humanity." Two others were in the middle range; those were "fringe benefits" and "job security." The other six factors were clearly in the "less attractive" range; these were: "job autonomy and independence," "working conditions," "availability of jobs," "social status of teaching," "opportunities for advancement" and the lowest, "salary."

On the six factors where there were statistically significant differences in responses (and five of these were in the less attractive range), generally speaking, women, education majors, and Alabama residents were somewhat higher in their ratings while males, physical science majors, and non-Alabama residents were lower. It should be pointed out that the "higher" ratings were not necessarily positive ratings.

Teaching was not held in very high regard if whether the students would recommend others to enter teaching is a valid index. Very few would recommend

teaching to their best friend, fewer to a sister, and still fewer to a brother.

The things reported to be "attractive" about teaching fell into four major groups: altruistic, personal satisfaction, having an impact on students, and selected extrinsic values. It is interesting that twice as many females as males responded with "attractive" features. Males responded to the "not attractive" question three to two over females; the "not attractive" features reported were: low salaries, lack of respect, no room for advancement and working conditions.

The items that attracted students to a non-education field were interest in a specific field of study, prestige, rewards, opportunity, and better utilization of their talents.

What would make teaching more attractive? Twice as many males as females reported "improved salaries." Other factors or conditions that would need to be changed are: prestige of teaching, benefits, working conditions, increased standards for teachers, and better teaching resources.

The criticism that persons entering teacher education come from the less able high school graduates is supported by this study since only 3.3% of the respondents had selected teaching as a career choice. On the other hand, perhaps there is hope of attracting more academically able students since one-fourth of the group reported they would consider being a teacher and another quarter of them were uncertain if they would.

There are innumerable lists of recommendations for improving American education. The majority, if not nearly all, suggest the imperative of high quality teachers which usually translates into more academically able students entering teacher education.

The sixteen recommendations of the National Commission for Excellence in Teacher Education's report entitled A Call for Change in Teacher Education (1985),

although not dissimilar to recommendations that other groups and organizations have made recently and in years past, are worthy of serious review and consideration. Several of these recommendations relate directly to the findings of this study and address factors/conditions which will have to be changed to attract "better" students:

1. Policy makers must be willing to "bid" for the talents of young people.
2. A national recruitment effort should be targeted toward the most able teacher candidates.
3. Colleges/universities must develop and maintain an academic and cultural climate which will afford teacher education students status comparable to that of students in other professional programs.
4. There must be an active recruitment-of-minorities program.
5. Teacher education programs need to be strengthened.
6. Salaries must be improved.
7. Working conditions must be improved.

Without a doubt, if the teaching profession wants to attract more able students, changes will have to occur. To paraphrase an old cliche: "Those who can teach, don't teach, or are frequently discouraged from doing so" (Lee & Pruitt, 1979). It appears that although the intrinsic values of teaching still abound for many, the extrinsic values, for the most part, are unsatisfying for the majority. If more "high aptitude" students are to be attracted to teaching, the profession will have to improve salaries, opportunity for advancement, social status, availability of jobs, and working conditions, as these were the least attractive features about teaching reported in this study.

Auburn, Alabama
February 24, 1986

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